

2/28/14

Questions for Steve Walker for Confirmation to Office of Housing Director

1. What are your major goals for the Office of Housing over the next four years? What do you see as the primary challenges facing the Office of Housing over the next four years?

It is imperative that we address housing and human service needs in partnership and from a regional perspective. The challenges are not challenges that government alone can solve, so we must be open new ideas and new partners. We will need to ensure that post-economic recovery residential growth is smart and sustainable and avoids marginalizing our region's most vulnerable populations.

2. What is your general philosophy for how to most effectively work with a City Council? How will you be responsive to Council requests, in particular regarding priorities that differ with those of the Executive branch?

My approach will be rooted in open dialogue, responsiveness and collaborative communication and problem solving. Working closely with the Housing Committee Chair, I intend to stay informed of Council concerns as well as share my work plan.

The Mayor has set an expectation for fostering a collaborative relationship with Council, and I feel confident in my abilities to both honor and harness the best thinking from both branches to advance solutions focused on making Seattle a great place to live and work.

3. How will you ensure that Council members and Legislative staff receive timely information needed from your department for Council to make sound policy and budgetary decisions?

It's in our mutual interest that City Council makes sound policy and budgetary decisions. We want to be sure that the information OH provides is accurate, clear, responsive to the inquiry, and timely. Fully understanding the context of questions posed to OH will be critical. Legislative staff can play a key role by explaining its objectives, purpose and what is driving timelines. I look forward to developing a collaborative rapport with legislative staff.

4. How will you work with other Departments to achieve the goals of the City? How about outside stakeholders?

Operating in silos is the epitome of bureaucracy. I have never subscribed to that.

The same applies to stakeholders. I know I'm going to start sounding repetitive at some point during this interview. That said, a sound stakeholder process requires predictability, inclusiveness, transparency and willingness to make tough but informed decisions.

5. What is your organizational management approach? How will you review internal operations at the Office of Housing to determine if they warrant improvement? What is your leadership approach?

I talk to my staff. I utilize my staff. I trust my staff. I empower my staff.

I operate with an open door policy and welcome feedback from staff of all levels about how we can be smarter, more efficient, more customer service oriented, and more supportive of each other, our partners (government and non-government alike), and the public with the end goal of raising the bar at the Office of Housing.

6. Give an example of your strategic planning abilities and describe an experience using strategic planning.

During my 17+ years at the Washington State Housing Finance Commission (WSHFC), I participated as both professional staff and as senior management in multiple short- and long-term strategic planning initiatives. Given the unpredictability of the marketplace the last several years, what years ago may have been 7 to 10 year strategic planning efforts have become 2 to 5 year strategic planning efforts.

An example: figuring out how to incorporate 3 HOPE VI redevelopments that were happening in the region at the same time into one heavily oversubscribed Housing Tax Credit program. This involved a year-long transparent statewide process, resulting in a 5-year phased funding strategy for meeting the competing priorities of multiple stakeholder interests. Another example: In 2009, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), WSHFC was charged with quick deployment of nearly \$200 million of stimulus money in Washington State. Facilitating an inclusive and transparent stakeholder process resulted in a near doubling of the originally projected number of housing units produced and jobs created. Our success in terms of measurable economic and social impact on an extremely ambitious timeframe gained our team national recognition.

7. What experience do you have balancing budget priorities in an environment where budget reductions are necessary?

Like most, WSHFC was heavily impacted by the Great Recession. The strategies we employed included: restructuring the organization to gain efficiencies, looking at any and all opportunities to lower operational expenses, opting not to fill positions vacated by retirements or voluntary departures, and self-imposing salary cuts. Knowing that staff is always an agency's greatest resource, we were thankfully able to ride out the worst of the recession without layoffs.

8. City of Seattle is currently implementing the Race and Social Justice Initiative to address racial and social inequities. In your position, how will you support and implement the Race and Social Justice Initiative? Can you provide some specific examples?

Given that racial and ethnic minority populations are the ones disproportionately represented among severely cost burdened and homeless households, the work of the Office of Housing is part and parcel with addressing race and social justice objectives. Households benefiting from OH programs funded by the Seattle Housing Levy and other funds have consistently proven higher minority representation than the general Seattle population.

9. What specific and measurable outcomes should the Office of Housing look to when measuring success?

Outcomes will include:

- Measures mandated by the Countywide Planning Policies, which will be incorporated into the Housing Element of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan.
- Stated goals of the current and future Seattle Housing Levy.
- Measures committed to under our RSJI annual work plan.

10. What options might the Office of Housing consider to guarantee significantly increased production of rental housing affordable to households earning between 60% and 80% of area median income (AMI) and expanded homeownership opportunities for those earning between 80% and 100% AMI? (those struggling to live and work in Seattle, yet not served by the multiple government programs that target under 60% AMI).

While the Office of Housing cannot guarantee the production of rental and ownership housing in these income ranges since public subsidies at the federal, state, and local level are targeted to households demonstrated to have the greatest housing needs in our city, we can continue to incentivize the production of housing affordable to households toward the higher end of the low-income spectrum through programs such as the Multifamily Tax Exemption and Housing Bonus. In addition, the Office of Housing will be working closely with the Department of Planning and Development on strategies to encourage production of diverse affordable housing options.

Lastly, OH must maintain an active dialogue with Cities across the country that struggle with many of our same issues. Whether considering best practices or keeping a watchful eye on innovative thinking we can learn a good deal by staying connected.

11. What is your vision for Office of Housing coordination with the city's Department of Human Services to reduce homelessness in Seattle and the region?

I first need to get up to speed with conversations already well underway with the Committee to End Homelessness, the Interagency Council, the Gates Foundation, other

philanthropic organizations and other stakeholders. The bottom line is Seattle is at the cutting edge in dealing with the complexities of addressing the housing and human services needs of our homeless population.

12. What are your thoughts on the outcomes of the current Housing Levy (# of units produced, # of units in the pipeline, # of units projected to be completed, income levels served, etc.) and thoughts on renewing the levy?

In the first four years of the current, 7-year levy, we've produced or preserved 1,643 rental housing units, provided rental assistance to help nearly 1,300 households avoid homelessness, and provided affordable loans for over 100 first-time home buyers.

The current housing levy was passed with 66% of Seattle voters in support. This was in 2009, during an economic recession. We know our City's voters care about helping vulnerable people achieve stable housing, and they care about having housing opportunities in Seattle for people earning modest wages. Our job is to demonstrate that we are successful stewards of City funding and that the housing we fund is making a real difference in people's lives. As has been the case with the 4 previous housing related ballot measures, being organized, strategic, inclusive, and transparent are the keys to ensuring continued support for housing by the Seattle voters.

The Housing Levy is up for renewal in 2016. In our current strong economy, we know people are very concerned about rising rents and displacement of Seattle's low and moderate income residents. The need for affordable housing will be clear. We will need to show that the Housing Levy continues to be an essential part of the City's overall approach to address housing affordability.

As we work with the community and the Mayor to develop a proposal for the 2016 Housing Levy, we will look closely at rising development costs and the availability of key sources of funding that City dollars leverage. Some of these sources of capital, operating and services funding are at risk or declining. We will be looking for new funding sources as well as innovations and efficiencies in our programs. Our goal will be to meet or exceed the amount of housing production and assistance achieved in the current housing levy.